

Schools in Disadvantaged Areas: Recognising Context and Raising Quality

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Abstract

Both educational attainment and school quality are typically lower in disadvantaged areas than others and much recent policy attention has been focused on each. This paper looks at the quality problem, exploring the relationships between disadvantaged contexts, what schools do, and the quality of schooling that they provide. The findings suggest that disadvantaged contexts impact on the organisation and processes of schools and that these effects differ significantly from one area to another, in ways that are not reflected by the usual indicators of disadvantage. School managers respond by adapting organisational design and processes. They are, however, constrained in these responses by the limited and short-life funding available, by the lack of evidence of good practice in specific contexts, and by lack of flexibility over major issues of organisation design and curriculum. Challenging contexts and the constraints on school responses together exert a downward pressure on quality. The paper argues that because school processes and quality are affected by context, school improvement in disadvantaged areas will not be achieved by generic measures, but only by policies tailored to disadvantaged areas and sensitive to differences between these areas. It suggests ways in which school improvement policies could be contextualised in order to raise quality in the poorest areas.

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Schools in Disadvantaged Areas: Low Attainment and a Contextualised Policy Response

Schools in disadvantaged areas present a problem for policy makers in England. Their academic performance is well below the national norm. 2001 data show that on average only a fifth of pupils in schools with the poorest intakes achieved five GCSE passes at grades A*-C, compared with 50% nationally (DfES 2002a). At Key Stage 3 (age 14) in 2000, the median for schools with more than 40% FSM¹ was that no pupil (0%) achieved the expected performance level in English, compared with 83% in schools with less than 5% FSM (Glennerster 2002).

This is a long established pattern (Floud et al. 1956, Douglas 1964), principally because poverty presents barriers to children's education which mean that they enter secondary school with lower than average attainment and dealing with social and economic problems that inhibit their learning. School effectiveness research has consistently shown that only about 8-15% of the attainment difference between schools is accounted for by what they actually do, rather than by intake variations (Reynolds et al. 1996, Sammons 1999). There is a 'profoundly close' relationship between poverty and attainment, such that 'the more socially disadvantaged the community served by a school, the very much more likely it is that the school will appear to underachieve' (Gibson and Asthana 1998).

While this evidence strongly suggests that, in the long run, broader social policies will contribute more to reducing school attainment differences than educational interventions, educational policy clearly has a part to play (Whitty 2000). Since the 1970s, successive governments in Britain have, within a broad framework of standardised provision within the state sector, provided a range of compensatory measures to assist children from disadvantaged backgrounds. These have taken various forms, including welfare interventions such as free school meals and on-site pupil or family support services, and additional educational provision such as homework clubs and reading recovery programmes. Compensatory measures have been a particular feature of New Labour education policy since 1997. Resources for schools in deprived areas have been increased through area-targeted programmes (Education Action Zones (EAZs) and Excellence in Cities (EiC)) and through initiatives such as

¹ Free School Meal eligibility. Pupils are eligible for Free School Meals if their parents claim Income Support or Income-based Job Seeker's Allowance

Pupil Learning Credits,² and the ‘extended schools’ programme. These measures appear to be having an impact, with GCSE higher grade attainment levels rising more quickly in EiC areas than others (OFSTED 2003), and while it is not universally agreed that they are sufficient (DfES 2003a, Johnson 2003), they nevertheless represent a recognition that context matters, and that something different and extra is needed for schools in poor areas if attainment is to reach expected levels.

Schools in Disadvantaged Areas: Low Quality and a Decontextualised Policy Response

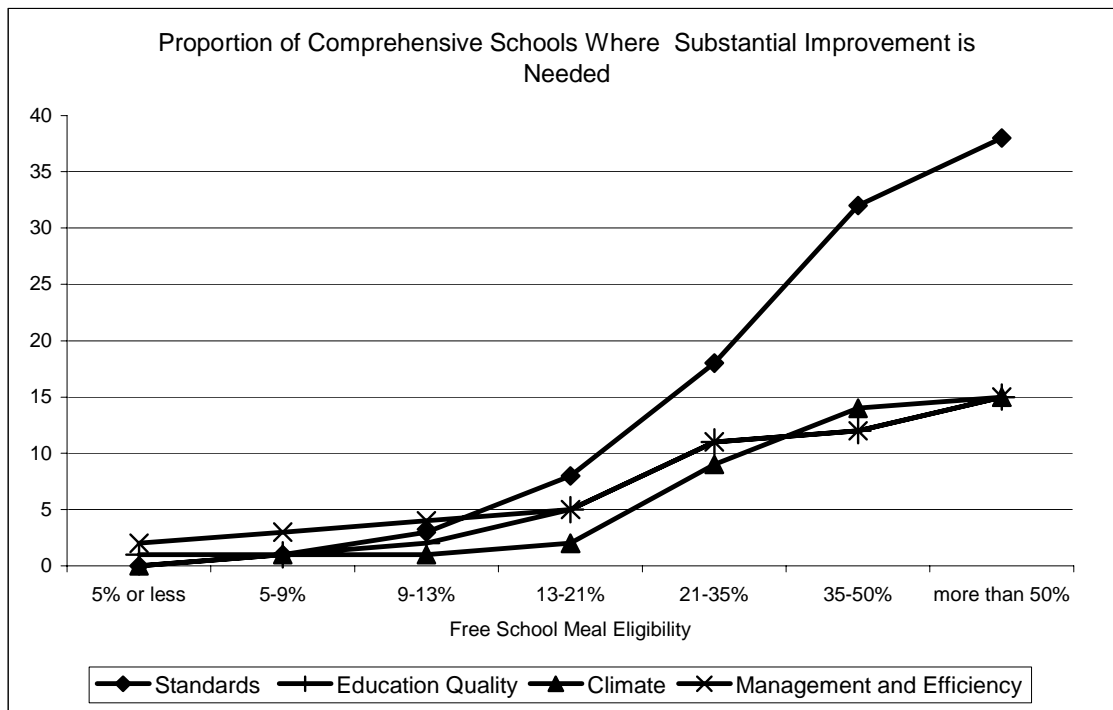
There is, however, also another problem with schools in poor areas: they typically do less well in inspections by OFSTED,³ central government’s principal mechanism for checking the quality of schooling.

Under the OFSTED inspection system, all schools are inspected regularly, on average once every four years. Those with unsatisfactory performance are described as having ‘serious weaknesses’, or put into special measures if they are ‘failing or likely to fail to give pupils an acceptable standard of education’ (School Inspections Act 1996 Section 13(9)). In 1998, the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) found that five times as many secondary schools in ‘worst neighbourhoods’ were in special measures than was typically the case (SEU 1998). In more detailed analyses, OFSTED (2001) combines its inspection grades into four areas: ‘standards’ (attainment and progress); ‘quality of education’ (teaching and the curriculum); ‘climate and ethos’; and ‘management and efficiency’. Figure 1 shows that, as might be expected, it is standards that are most strongly associated with FSM. But high levels of FSM are associated with worse inspection grades on all the other measures as well – measures of what schools actually do as well as measures of attainment and progress. There is an apparent quality problem as well as an attainment problem: a matter for concern not just because of its consequences for attainment but for equity reasons, and more broadly because discrepancies in school quality can influence the dynamics of housing markets and reinforce residential social segregation (Gibbons 2001). It is the quality problem that is the focus of this paper.

² Pupil Learning Credits were funds for schools in deprived areas to spend on enrichment activities. They were introduced in 2001 and have subsequently been withdrawn and absorbed within schools’ core funding.

³ OFSTED is the Office for Standards in Education

Figure 1: Relationship between OFSTED Inspection Outcome and FSM Eligibility



Source: National Summary Data Report for Secondary Schools 2001 Data (OFSTED 2001)

Explanations for the poor quality of schools in disadvantaged areas are contested. The dominant one has been that the problem is internal to schools. Not all schools in poor areas offer a poor education. Figure 1 shows that five out of six high FSM schools are *not* adjudged to need substantial improvement in their quality of education, climate, or management and efficiency. This would seem to suggest that a deprived socio-economic context (at least one that is measured by FSM eligibility) does not in itself determine school failure, and that the explanation for the low quality problem in many schools in deprived areas lies within the schools themselves, accounted for by poor management and professional practice. School effectiveness and improvement research (SEI) has tended to support this view, by producing generic notions of good practice and failing to identify contextual factors that might foster or impede their implementation (Angus 1993, Thrupp 1999, Willmott 1999). The major UK studies of schools in disadvantaged areas have focused on successful or improving schools, in order to identify what they do well (OFSTED 1993, NCE 1996), and perhaps unsurprisingly have identified exemplary schools where good leadership and teaching appear to overcome the problems of a disadvantaged context, rather than bringing out the effects of context on practice.

This internal focus has led to an emphasis in policy on fixing the problem by attempting to get staff in schools in disadvantaged areas to improve: in other words to get them to implement the practices that are successful elsewhere. There has been a reluctance to acknowledge contextual influences for fear that these might be used as an excuse for poor practice. As a result, there has been little attempt to tailor school improvement policies to particular contexts. While policies to raise attainment have consistently featured additional support measures for disadvantaged pupils, school improvement policies have tended to be generic. Under the New Labour government, good practice advice has been disseminated through measures such as the Beacon Schools scheme, web-based resources, and by more direct measures like the standardisation of numeracy and literacy teaching. Scrutiny through the inspection system has been lightened for successful schools but tightened for struggling schools, which are also subject to closure and a 'Fresh Start' if they consistently fail to improve. These school-level interventions have been underpinned by efforts to strengthen the teaching profession, such as pay increases, recruitment incentives and training bursaries, and workforce reform. However, these are all policies that apply across the board, simply with more pressure for those schools that are failing. Only recently has there been a recognition that additional or different measures may be needed in schools in disadvantaged areas. In 2001, the government launched its 'Schools in Challenging Circumstances' initiative, incorporating extra funds along with additional inspection visits, support from specialist recruitment managers, and trainee headship posts. Even so, the government's analysis of the problem is still dominated by references to the poor practice of heads and teachers (DfES 2001: p49) and the initiative dominated by 'access to good practice and advice' (p50) and support to schools to 'turn themselves around' (p51). A more significant departure is an associated pilot project in eight schools looking at different organisational designs, such as much smaller classes and integration of activities with community regeneration programmes.

Meanwhile, the neglect of context has been increasingly criticised, on the basis of growing evidence that being located in a disadvantaged area has an impact on school processes, which is precisely what is being measured by the OFSTED inspection. Early work on poverty and schooling pointed to exactly this problem (Plowden 1967, Hargreaves 1967, Halsey 1972, Willis 1977, Rutter et al 1979, Ball 1981), and a fresh body of work has emerged in the late 1990s, again indicating that concentrated poverty has an impact on what schools do, as well as directly on what pupils achieve (Gewirtz 1998, Bishops' Conference 1999, Clark et al. 1999, Thrupp 1999, OFSTED 2000). These studies have highlighted three main issues: resources (including staff); relationships; and the impact of both resources and relationships on school practice, on curriculum coverage, classroom practice, teachers' activities and time allocation, and organisation and management. They do not contradict the notion that some contextual difficulties

can be overcome by excellent management and highly skilled and hard working teachers, nor do they claim that difficult contexts necessarily lead to school failure. However, they do suggest that achieving success is difficult, even where good professional practice is in place, and that it may require additional resources, and tailored practices, rather than attempts to apply the same organisational models within broadly the same funding framework.

Aims of this Paper

This paper reports on new research looking at contextual effects on school processes. It aims to explore directly the link between such effects and quality differences as measured by the OFSTED inspection. It also focuses on differences *between* schools in different disadvantaged contexts (rather than on differences between ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ schools as most of the existing research has done), in order to illuminate whether it is poverty per se that matters, or whether there are differences between similarly high poverty areas with varying locational characteristics, housing, amenities or culture.

The paper gives an overview of evidence from a recent study of secondary schools, which can be read in full in the form of a PhD thesis (Lupton 2003a). The study incorporated two parts. One was a quantitative analysis of the relationship between OFSTED inspection results and area deprivation. This used OFSTED inspection grades (known as Judgement Recording Scores) as a measure of school quality and analysed these in conjunction with a range of contextual measures including FSM, area deprivation measures, census data and institution type variables. This part of the research drew on a sample of schools in eleven Local Education Authorities (LEAs).⁴ Its purpose was to identify relationships between quality and different contextual variables, for further qualitative exploration.

The second part of the study involved case studies of four schools, selected from within the eleven LEAs. All served neighbourhoods within the top 3% most deprived wards in the country using 1991 Census data,⁵ and as Table 1 demonstrates, all had intake characteristics that reflected high levels of deprivation in the area. All had FSM levels more than twice the national average, and two, both inner city schools, had exceptionally high FSM

⁴ These 11 LEAs are the English LEAs in CASE’s wider study of disadvantaged areas, which is reported on in Lupton (2001 and 2003b).

⁵ This analysis was conducted in order to select neighbourhoods for CASE’s wider study and is explained in Glennerster et al. (1999)

eligibility, in the top 5% of schools in the country. All of the schools had higher than average numbers of pupils with special educational needs (SEN), two of them twice the national average. Two schools had a majority of pupils for whom English was a second language and all had lower than average prior attainment (as reported by their OFSTED reports).

Table 1: Case Study Schools

	Southside Grange School	Middle Row HS	West-City HSG	The Farcliffe School
Region	North-East	Midlands	London	South-East
Area Type	Industrial area in semi-rural LEA	Inner city	Inner city	Seaside town
Ethnic Mix of area	Mainly white	Mainly Asian	Mixed	Mainly White
Housing Type and tenure	Mixed	Victorian street terraces, mainly private	Medium to high rise flats, mainly Council	Mixed
School Status	Comp	Comp. Sports College	Comp. Technology College.	Sec.Modern
Sex	Mixed	Mixed	Girls	Mixed
No. on Roll (Jan 2001)	670	843	892	626
% Eligible for FSM (Jan 2001) Nat. ave = 16	37	61	62	36
% with SEN (Jan 2001) Nat. ave= 23	24	48	30	44
% with English as Additional Language (Jan 2001) Nat.ave = 8	1	95	56	1
OFSTED	An improving school	A good school	A good school	More strengths than weaknesses
GCSE 5 A*-C 2000 Nat. ave = 49	19	36	41	3

Sources: DfES, OFSTED reports

The aim was to select schools which, although all disadvantaged, varied in their local contexts, in terms of region, area type as defined by the Office for National Statistics (Wallace and Denham 1996), ethnic mix and housing type and tenure. Table 1 demonstrates that this was achieved. Southside Grange School⁶ was a co-educational comprehensive in an industrial area in the North East of England, with pockets of deprivation among the most severe in the country. Middle Row High School was also a co-educational comprehensive, in an inner area of a large Midlands city. It had recently been awarded specialist sports college status. West-City High School for Girls was a single sex comprehensive, in Inner London, with technology college status, and The Farcliffe School was a co-educational secondary modern school in a seaside town in the South East of England. It is important to note that the schools were not selected because they were failing schools. The intention was to observe schools across the quality continuum, in order to be able to explore relationships between context and quality. In practice, it proved impossible to gain access to a failing school, but, as Table 1 shows, the selected schools did have varying quality assessments by OFSTED, and varying levels of academic attainment. In the simplest terms, there were two inner city schools, West-City HSG and Middle Row HS, in very deprived areas of mixed ethnicity, which also had relatively high attainment (for high FSM schools) and were judged by OFSTED to be good schools, and two schools outside major conurbations both with predominantly white populations and lower aggregate levels of deprivation. These two schools had lower attainment than the first two and were less highly rated by OFSTED, although neither was regarded as a bad school.

In each school, an initial phase of work was carried out to establish the context of the school, based on interviews with head teachers and LEA representatives, collection and analysis of socio-economic data, and mapping of pupil postcodes. A second phase then explored the impact of context on school organisation and practice. This involved qualitative interviews with each head teacher and a sample of teaching staff (6 to 8 in each school), as well as teaching and support staff with specific roles in relation to attendance, behaviour or learning support. Unstructured observations were also carried out, and supporting documentation (such as attendance and prior attainment data) were collected.

⁶ Not its real name. The names of all the schools have been changed to protect their identities.

The findings are summarised in this paper in the following sections:

- The distinctive features of schools in disadvantaged areas;
- The differences between schools and the importance of local context;
- How schools respond;
- The relationship between context and practice;

A final section draws implications for policy.

Poverty Matters: The Distinctive Features of Schools in Disadvantaged Areas

The primary aim of this work was to explore differences between schools in disadvantaged areas, not to make comparisons with more advantaged schools. Nevertheless, an important initial finding was that, consistent with the findings of Thrupp (1999) and others, all of the case study schools had features that were viewed by their staff as being distinctive from those of schools in less disadvantaged areas. About half of the interviewees made direct comparisons with other schools in which they had taught, and others referred to contrasting experiences as parents or pupils in middle class schools, giving a strong indication that what was being described in these schools was not the norm elsewhere. The disadvantaged contexts of the schools appeared to be influential for classroom practice and teaching resources, and for school organisation more broadly, generating numerous relatively small process effects that together contributed to school environments that were described as being characteristically different from those found in more advantaged settings. Here I have briefly outlined these effects under five headings: additional learning needs; material poverty; the emotional climate and disturbed behaviour; reluctant participation; and the unpredictable school.

Additional learning needs

The first distinctive feature was the wide range of abilities and prior attainment within the schools and in particular the extreme learning needs of the lowest attainers. These were difficult to meet, even where additional learning support was provided, and generated additional demands on mainstream teaching staff. Teachers reported a lack of appropriate books and worksheets for lower ability pupils, meaning that they had to create their own resources, a disproportionately time-consuming activity. At both of the inner city schools which had large numbers of ethnic minority pupils, the same was also said of resources for pupils at the early stages of English. Not all the teachers interviewed were confident of their ability to create appropriate resources for pupils at the very early stages of learning, or with limited English. They saw this as a specialist job for which their general teacher training had not equipped them.

Where the majority in a class were low attainers, teaching approaches were often adapted. In some cases, these appeared to be adaptations appropriate to the learning styles and prior attainment of the pupils. For example, teachers made greater use of telling rather than writing when they gave their instructions. However, in some cases, adaptations arose out of the need to control classes. A tendency towards less challenging tasks was noted where controlling the classroom was difficult. Some teachers admitted that it was easy to slip into feeling that a good lesson was one in which most of the pupils had been on task for most of the time, and major disruption had been avoided. The quality and the challenge of the task could be seen as secondary. Worksheets and copying exercises were used more commonly with lower classes. Subject content was simplified and discussion was limited. These findings add to a substantial body of research (see Hallam 2002 for a review) suggesting that teaching for groups with many lower ability pupils tends to be insufficiently challenging.

Material poverty

A second issue was the adjustments that were made to deal with material poverty. Considerable resources went into making sure that poverty did not interfere with the core curriculum. For example, none of the schools expected financial contributions from parents and pupils for equipment and materials. What was more at issue was the impact of pupils' lack of resources on the range of extra-curricular activities offered and its impact on minor organisational and administrative processes. Enrichment activities had to be carefully chosen so that parents could afford to pay, and major trips had to be subsidised heavily and planned well in advance so that parents had time to save. Homework was another issue that had to be carefully considered. Few pupils in any of the schools could be assumed to have learning resources like reference books and computers at home. All the schools provided access to libraries and computers after school, and homework clubs. Even on a daily basis, lack of resources made a difference. Pupils did not always come to lessons with basic equipment like a pen or ruler, which necessitated time being spent in lessons giving it out or collecting it in.

The emotional climate and disturbed behaviour

Third, and possibly most distinctively, all the schools had a charged emotional environment. The number of pupils who were anxious, traumatised, unhappy, jealous, angry or vulnerable was reported to be much greater than in schools where parents were materially well off, less stressed themselves and more able to secure a stable and comfortable environment for their children.

In each school, there was a minority of children (probably no more than about twenty) who had severely disturbed behaviour. These pupils were disruptive in lessons, found it difficult to concentrate, were sometimes aggressive towards

other pupils and staff, found it hard to accept rules, and struggled to get through the school day smoothly on a regular basis.

Apart from these pupils, the emotional needs of the pupils more generally had a wider impact on the schools. Pupils tended to share their emotions with staff, creating a distinctive teacher/pupil relationship, not just one of educator/learner, but significant adult/child. Teachers talked about 'mothering', 'caring' and 'social work' as well as about teaching and learning. This extract is typical:

'I think you feel more sort of motherly. It's the wrong word but you feel you ought to protect them and look after them... You do tend to take more care of them I think because you know they don't have that care at home. Maybe care's the wrong word but maybe their parents just don't have time or the money or know-how sometimes to give them that attention. Some of them, you can tell they really like the attention and you make a fuss of them.' (Class Teacher 6, Southside Grange School)

This had three main implications for teachers' work. Firstly, they had to develop strategies for dealing with pupils' emotional needs in the classroom. At West-City HSG for example, one teacher described limiting the amount of time he spent on whole group instruction, in order to spend more time walking around the classroom to give emotional support to individual pupils. Several teachers referred to the need to develop clear routines and to introduce new challenges carefully and with reassurance because children with insecure or disrupted home lives sometimes felt threatened by change. Some teachers felt that dealing with the emotional issues and helping pupils to work on handling their emotions more positively, developing their abilities to interact well with each other and to listen and concentrate, were valuable in themselves as lesson outcomes, even if short-term academic learning was limited.

The second implication was that supposed non-contact time was taken up with pupils' emotional and behavioural problems. Form tutors, particularly, seemed to 'spend forever on pastoral issues' (Class Teacher 3, West-City HSG), including contacting parents. In the schools with the greater behavioural problems, filling in incident sheets and discussing difficult pupils with other staff also ate into non-contact time, such that planning and marking had to be done before or after school.

The third implication was a more general one relating to the nature of the work and teachers' motivations. These were draining atmospheres in which to work, more demanding on a personal level than simply delivering the subject.

Teachers had serious pupil welfare issues to worry about as well as academic outcomes. They were also regularly dealing with situations of drama, tears, or conflict in which it was difficult to find the right response, and hard not to feel attacked personally nor drawn in too closely. This was rewarding work. With only one exception, all the staff I interviewed enjoyed this aspect of their work and were motivated by it. However, it was energy-sapping.

Reluctant participation

Low attendance was a problem in all the schools (Table 2). At all four, a significant proportion of absences was accounted for by a small numbers of persistent non-attenders or pupils who took whole weeks off at a time. This suggests that schools dealing with a higher than average number of extremely disaffected pupils will tend to have low overall attendance rates, even if the vast majority of pupils attend most the time, because of the effect on statistics of the virtual non-attendance of a small group.

Table 2: Percentage of Pupil Half Days Missed Through Absence 2000/01

	Authorised	Unauthorised	Total
Southside Grange	8.6	3.5	12.1
Middle Row HS	9.7	3.8	13.5
West-City HSG	10.0	1.3	11.3
The Farcliffe	10.0	3.0	13.0
England	7.8	1.1	8.9

Source: 2001 DfES National Pupil Absence Tables

Similarly, formal parental participation through consultation evenings and parents' meetings was said to be low in all the schools. There are no national data with which to compare, and not all of the schools kept data. The estimates of staff suggested that attendance rates of about 50% were considered to be good. A further issue for schools in these disadvantaged contexts was, therefore, the need for strenuous efforts to increase participation rates. All of the schools had invested additional resources in increasing attendance and in home-school liaison, and these are discussed later in the paper. There were also, however, day-to-day issues for teaching staff arising from the low participation level: encouraging and cajoling pupils to complete homework and return it and bring the relevant books and equipment to lessons. None of these problems were intractable, and staff reported that clear and consistent policies within departments and across the school, and the provision of homework clubs, all helped. But they demanded constant reinforcement. As one manager put it, it

was easy to design initiatives but ‘it’s the energy to sustain these things that’s difficult.’ (Deputy Head teacher, Middle Row HS).

The unpredictable school

These issues, together, added up to an unpredictable working environment. Incidents could erupt at any time, such that neither lessons nor free time could be relied upon to go according to plan. Unplanned events impacted on senior managers as well as teachers. The head teacher at The Farcliffe School compared her daily work with her experience in more advantaged schools. At The Farcliffe, she was ‘doing things I haven’t done in twenty years’: pupil counselling, staff support and involvement in daily discipline or welfare issues. As a result, strategic issues and planning were disrupted. At Southside Grange, the head teacher’s typical day involved seeing pupils into the school in the morning, taking assembly, standing in the corridor between lessons, doing back-up behaviour patrol, talking to pupils and staff in the dining hall at lunchtime, dealing with several disciplinary incidents or counselling children with emotional outbursts, supervising pupils leaving at the end of the day and (on some days) teaching. Paperwork and planning were usually done in the evenings.

Moreover, at the most basic, level, pupil mobility meant that it was never clear how many pupils, with what needs, would be in the school at any time. New arrivals had to be catered for at short notice. At The Farcliffe School, so many new pupils were arriving that the school was running an admissions day each month, followed by an assessment day, rather than having to deal with new admissions on an ad hoc basis. At the time of the fieldwork in December 2001, 37 new pupils were expected at an upcoming admissions day. Meanwhile, existing pupils could suddenly disappear. This level of mobility meant that setting and achieving academic targets was difficult, as was planning class and ability groupings. It also meant that performance measures might be misleading, if much of the teaching of GCSE pupils had taken place in other schools, prior to their arrival.

Differences between Schools: The importance of local context

These findings applied to all of the schools in the study. However, there were also different process effects depending on the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of each area. One poor area was not the same as another. Staff commented primarily on two groups of factors. One group related to pupils’ social and economic characteristics. These included family income, ethnic origin, gender, family structure and relationships, and family resources such as housing, transport, books and computers. These are referred to here as *pupil*

characteristics. The second set of issues, more commonly mentioned, related to the *cultures and attitudes* of pupils and their families. This is in some senses an artificial distinction since culture and attitudes cannot properly be divorced from social and economic structures, but for this purpose it provides a useful way of distinguishing what were for teachers practical issues that could be addressed by pragmatic interventions, and those which were less tangible and in many respects harder to influence because they were about the deep-seated attitudes that pupils and parents carried in their approach to school.

Pupil characteristics

It has already been observed that all the schools had intakes with high levels of material poverty and additional learning needs. However, in terms of other pupil characteristics, a general distinction could be made between the two inner city schools, West-City HSG and Middle Row HS, and the two schools in white working class areas outside major cities. In the latter schools, Southside Grange and The Farcliffe, staff drew attention to the emotional and practical needs of pupils who came from disrupted or violent families. Some children were perceived to be lacking consistent love, attention and support at home, while a minority were actually neglected or abused.

Difficulties at home played themselves out at school in concentration problems, attention-seeking behaviour, difficulties adapting to a consistent rule structure, unwillingness to trust and the need for emotional support and reassurance. Although behaviour at both The Farcliffe School and Southside Grange was generally good, staff at both referred to the frequency of minor disruption. At Southside Grange, they also spoke about the very disturbed behaviour of a minority of pupils, whose emotional outbursts could be extraordinarily disruptive to the general order of the school. Managing such pupils and engaging them was a daily struggle in which progress was slow and success could never be taken for granted.

Different issues were raised in the inner city schools. These schools both had small numbers of children who arrived at the school with no English, and large numbers who did not speak any English at home, or have access to English media. Outside the school, many pupils from non-English speaking families were expected to help with translation and to take adult responsibilities for their parents, activities that impinged upon their school work. Among Muslim families there were expectations on girls to undertake domestic chores, as well as restrictions on their social activities. In general it was these kinds of issues that were raised most commonly by staff, rather than concerns about emotional relationships and support within families, although there were, of course, specific cases of abuse, neglect, intergenerational tensions or family conflict.

‘Culture’ and attitudes to learning

The majority of teachers’ remarks about local context, however, related to pupils’ culture and attitudes. They suggested that these were influenced by five main contextual factors: ethnicity and cultural difference; gender and prior attainment; economic opportunity; the nature of social networks; and the reputations of the areas and the schools.

Striking contrasts were observed between the predominantly white areas (Southside and Farcliffe) and the inner city areas with high ethnic minority populations (West-City and Middle Row). At both Southside Grange and The Farcliffe School, pupils were perceived as having different behavioural expectations at home than at school. Several staff in both schools spoke about children having ‘different sets of rules’ at home, governing their manners towards adults and other children, their use of language, aggression or physical violence, and the acceptability of adult behaviours (smoking, drinking and sex) and illegal behaviours. In some instances, this was seen as an issue of different norms of behaviour, as illustrated by this description of the school attempting to enforce a ban on gambling:

‘We took one bairn home one day for playing pitch and toss, which is a local gambling game. ..., took the bairn home in the middle of the afternoon, took them in and there was a gambling school going on in the house. All these people in their underwear, sitting there drinking beer, playing poker and the father just said ‘what’s the problem?’ and in the end we brought the kid back to school because we thought he’d be better off at school. And the father wasn’t being awkward. He simply could not understand why I didn’t want these kids gambling, because it was part of their life.’
(Head teacher, Southside Grange School)

In other cases, the problem was seen to arise from the structures of family and society, which failed to provide children with any constant set of rules. Children were perceived to have a lot of freedom and unsupervised leisure. Some only had one parent at home or alternated between different step-families and grandparents who had different behavioural expectations. As a result, they found it hard to adjust to the disciplined environment of school.

Teachers in the white working class areas also alluded specifically and frequently to negative or indifferent attitudes towards learning and towards school, among both children and parents. This disinterest in school was seen as stemming largely from parents, who did not share the school’s orientation towards learning and in some cases were seen as giving clear messages to

children that their school work was unimportant. Parents were seen as willing to condone absence from school, keeping children off to go shopping, work on the market, or take holidays during term time, and unwilling to participate actively in their children's education, helping with homework or collaborating with school over homework and discipline. As previous research (Lareau 1987) has found, some teachers were inclined to interpret lack of parental participation as a parental failing, indicating lack of interest in education and sometimes lack of interest in the children themselves. However, there were other staff who offered more structural explanations, noting that white working class areas contained many families whose expectations of social mobility through education were small, conditioned by their own experiences over several generations.

Reviewing these cultural issues, the head teacher at The Farcliffe School, reflected that 'it must be easier at inner city schools where they have ethnic minority pupils whose parents think education is important and also where there's a work ethic', and on the face of it this was borne out by the observations of teachers at West-City HSG and Middle Row HS. Family life certainly played a bigger part within the Islamic culture than in liberal western families. Many children attended evening Islamic school, worked in family businesses, or were expected to visit or receive family members in the evening and at weekends, rather than having unsupervised leisure time. This created its own problems. Some children had little homework time as well as little leisure time, and in some cases, parental restrictions on children, and their expectations of being able to enforce these with punishment, were uncomfortably authoritarian for staff accustomed to a more liberal culture. However, because respectful behaviour towards adults was expected from children, parents were more likely to be supportive of school behaviour policies and sanctions.

Orientations towards learning were also developed in a different context. Many families in the inner city areas were new to British education and the British labour market. If a low value on education arose in white working class communities from generations of manual labour or unemployment and low expectations of social mobility, this was not the case among many immigrant families, who saw education as a way up in society. Again this was perceived to create its own problems because parents lacked knowledge of the education system, or of the range of jobs that were potentially available. Nevertheless staff referred to a commitment to academic success and a positive attitude towards schooling.

In both the inner city schools, staff reported practical difficulties dealing with parents, such as lack of translation, parents not understanding the educational system, or not being on the telephone. However, they rarely mentioned lack of support for the school's values. Behaviour was generally good, with several

staff remarking that most pupils were focused on learning and that 'you're not firefighting all the time and dealing with behavioural problems. You are dealing with issues to do with the socio-economic area and environment but I think it's an orderly environment. Teachers feel that they can teach most of the time' (Deputy Head, West-City HSG). As one teacher at Middle Row HS said 'most of the children really want to learn' (Class Teacher 3, Middle Row HS). Thus although the socio-economic context created barriers to learning, the cultural context in these areas appeared in some respects to be beneficial to the school.

On the basis of this evidence, it appeared that differences between areas in attitudes towards learning were a reflection of ethnic differences. But this was not the only explanation, nor does it explain differences between schools in 'white' areas and between schools in 'ethnic' areas.

One obvious point was that teachers were observing area cultures through their dealings with the pupils in the school, whose behaviour and orientation towards learning were also influenced by individual characteristics. West-City HSG was a girls' school, and several staff observed that this was a key factor determining attitudes to learning and to school in general. Even in the other schools, staff commented on gender mix within classes and year groups as impacting on levels of disruptive behaviour and on teaching strategies. More boys tended to mean more disruption. Prior attainment also made a difference. In all the schools, staff noted that it was the lower attaining pupils who most easily became disaffected and who reacted by non-participation or disruptive behaviour. Thus it was not surprising that pro-school attitudes were less commonly reported in the secondary modern school, The Farcliffe, than the higher attaining comprehensive, West-City HSG, which had prior attainment close to the national average in some years.

Another factor shaping aspirations and future expectations was the structure of economic opportunity in each area. All of the areas in the study had suffered major employment decline between the 1970s and the mid 1990s, impacting on expectations of work. But current opportunity structures also mattered. As it happened, both of the white working class areas in this study were peripheral: - physically isolated from the wide range of opportunities and high-achieving role models that large urban areas could provide. Each had relied on specific geographically-based industries that had seriously declined: tourism in Farcliffe and steel and chemicals in Southside. Southside had since experienced virtually no economic recovery. Farcliffe had gained jobs principally in other low paid sectors, notably care. Both economies offered limited opportunities in the formal labour market, with high unemployment and a predominance of low wage employment for the lower skilled, and they had well established illegal economies.

Illegal economies were established in the other two areas as well, but these neighbourhoods were also closer to the opportunities afforded by major urban centres. Although both of these economies had suffered major manufacturing decline, the nearby city centres had, from the mid to late 1990s, experienced growth in professional and financial service jobs and in retail and hospitality industries. In theory, at least, there was a wider world of opportunity to connect to. West-City HSG was best placed and was making particular attempts to make these links. The school had an expansive programme of careers education from Year 7, and had developed relationships with a large firm of City solicitors, whose staff provided mentoring, visits, careers talks and work experience. This situation could be contrasted with that of Southside Grange School, which had no large white-collar firms to connect with. Industrial structure and its change over time, not just ethnicity, must therefore be considered as a factor in shaping attitudes and aspirations. Whether the orientations of white working class pupils in areas in major urban centres, with booming service economies, would be the same as in the economically marginalised ones in this study is not clear.

Nor is it clear that the location of economic opportunity, on its own, is enough to influence perceptions of futures. As Putnam (2000) has suggested, people in low income communities do not necessarily benefit from the proximity of wider opportunity structures unless they also have 'bridging' social networks that give them 'word of mouth' access to employment or shared leisure interests. 'Bonding' networks, within communities, are valuable for social and practical support but may serve to keep people embedded within these communities rather than connected to others.

'Embeddedness' was certainly a feature of the white working class areas in this study, but the notion emerged most strongly in interviews with staff from Middle Row HS, in a predominantly Muslim inner city area. They pointed to three issues. Firstly, many marriages were to people from Pakistan, so marriage did not extend links to other areas of the city or country. Secondly there were strong links and time-consuming family and religious networks within the area. Thirdly, local families were investing in property and businesses, demonstrating a commitment to staying in the area. Racism was a deterrent to reaching out into other areas, but it was also the case that one of the strengths of the area for Pakistani families was its cultural homogeneity and the familiarity and support that it offered. Several teachers commented that the biggest difficulty that pupils faced was the insularity of their environment:

'Middle Row is a ghetto for the kids of this area. They very seldom get out.... If you take white middle class kids, they're quite cute. They know about things, they know about the world. These kids don't. They live in a closed society. If you put them down

anywhere else in England they're be totally lost. They'd have no support, no nothing'. (Class Teacher 6, Middle Row HS)

By contrast, West-City did not have one ethnic community but many. As well as having strong in-group networks, particularly within the sizeable Turkish and Bangladeshi communities, it was also a 'melting pot' of different ethnic groups, that did not necessarily see themselves as settled in the area. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some African groups were demonstrating patterns of traditional white migration: aspiring to move out to the suburbs and to Essex as they became more upwardly mobile. Some staff referred to the determination of families to succeed in British society and not necessarily to make their lives within the community of West-City.

A final, connected, issue was the extent to which the images that schools and areas conveyed contributed to feelings of self-esteem. In this study, both of the inner city schools were institutionally stable and well regarded, and had a local image that pupils could be proud of. The other schools were not in this position. The Farcliffe School, particularly, had a very poor reputation and little distinctive to offer pupils in the way of facilities and curriculum. Moreover, rejection in the selective system also conveyed to pupils a sense that learning was something they were not very good at. One member of staff said that failing the 11-plus and being allocated to the 'worst school' meant that some pupils 'just walk through the door and just give up'. Another noted that 'kids come here because no-one can be bothered to get them into somewhere else... those kids come in with those chips very firmly on their shoulder'.

Neighbourhood images, as well as school ones, were important. As Howarth (2002) has demonstrated, living in a stigmatised neighbourhood can engender low self-esteem, presenting particular challenges for schools in helping pupils to develop positive identities and take their place confidently in society. In the schools in this study, there were certainly issues of racial stigmatisation in the inner city schools, perhaps particularly in Middle Row, which had a strong identity as an 'Asian' area, often poorly regarded by those outside it (Lupton 2003b). In the predominantly white areas, stigma was also an issue, especially in Southside, where low housing demand contributed to a marked polarisation between neighbourhoods, and the labelling of certain neighbourhoods as 'sink areas', where no-one would want to live if they had a choice.

More or less favourable contexts

In combination, these factors meant that although all the schools were in disadvantaged areas, some were in areas that might be seen as being more pro-school than others. In fact, the more disadvantaged areas within this study, the

mixed ethnic inner city areas, appeared to offer an environment that was more conducive to running a teaching and learning organization than the less disadvantaged areas, which were predominantly white and outside major conurbations. Parents and pupils were more inclined to see the instrumental value of education, and to meet disciplinary expectations. This is a fairly crude point and in a longer version of this paper (Lupton 2003a), I discuss at length two important issues that must also be considered in the interpretation of these findings. I note the importance of teachers' subjective interpretations of their context, observing particularly that educational and organizational difficulties arising from ethnic differences tended to be interpreted by staff as practical problems that could be overcome to some extent by efforts on their part (and that current good practice supported these efforts) , whereas those arising from social class differences tended to be interpreted as problems of cultural deficit, where changes would have to come from parents and children (and where it was difficult to see how schools and teachers could adapt within the confines of the current educational system and curriculum). I also note that area contexts were mitigated by the institutional contexts of schools (their history, resources, reputations and position in the organizational life cycle) and their position in the competitive market for pupils. Schools could have relatively favourable area contexts, but be constrained by a relatively unfavourable position in the market, or institutionally.

These contextual factors could affect their organization and processes directly. For example, resources might need to be devoted to marketing, or it could be difficult to recruit experienced staff. They could also impact by skewing intakes towards the more socially disadvantaged pupils in the area. The aim in this paper is not to imply that area context alone is important, but to emphasise that the organizational impacts on schools in different kinds of disadvantaged areas can be significantly different, in ways which are not fully recognized by the mechanisms used to allocate funds and to form judgements on their quality.

How Schools Respond

Thus far, this paper has highlighted how context impacts upon schools, without considering the attempts of governors, head teachers and staff to respond. However, there are of course deliberate adaptations made by school managers in order to deal with different contexts, which impact upon school practices and processes.

In the four schools in this study, these adaptations extended to almost every aspect of organisation: lesson lengths, class sizes, ability groupings, additional learning support, behaviour and attendance management, pastoral care, extra-

curricular activities and so on. For reasons of space, I do not document all of these in this paper, but try to give a flavour of the kinds of responses by focusing on the critical issues of attendance and behaviour, and also to highlight the apparently complex relationship between context and organization.

I have already indicated that one of the striking features of the schools was the effort that needed to be made to secure the participation of pupils and parents and to manage behaviour. All of the schools had implemented a first-day contact system for non-attendance and all had also invested in additional staff specifically to monitor and follow up attendance. At Middle Row HS, efforts to improve attendance had recently been upgraded, with registration at the end of the afternoon, spot checks and home visits as well as attendance boards and rewards for good attenders. Two of the schools had specific home-school workers, over and above the teaching staff. All four schools had well developed systems for behaviour management, with clear standards, policies and procedures for the reporting of incidents. At the two schools in the white working class areas, where behaviour was more problematic, behaviour management involved a considerable investment of resources. The head teacher at Southside Grange School had opted for a system of back-up support, with a senior member of staff patrolling the school at all times dealing with behavioural incidents and providing support to staff, while at The Farcliffe School, where there was a shortage a senior staff, a similar role was carried out by non-teaching staff known as Key Stage Pastoral Assistants.

Dealing with the problematic behaviour of a small minority of pupils was a major organizational issue, disproportionate to the numbers of such pupils in the schools. A critical issue was the extent to which these pupils were retained within the school, provided for in specialist schools, educated off-site or excluded. The schools' strategies in relation to this issue are discussed in the longer work upon which this paper is based. Here I concentrate on the implications for the school of the pupils who were left. The need to make appropriate provision for these pupils while minimizing disruption to others had primarily resulted in the establishment of specialized learning support units, although there were other initiatives, such as the creation of a separate tutor group at Southside Grange School. Learning support units enabled pupils to be withdrawn for periods ranging from two weeks to more than one term, for help with their behaviour and often to provide extra help with basic skills and core curriculum areas. They were funded by Excellence in Cities and provided in addition to learning support for pupils with special educational needs or language needs, whose funding was directly related to the number of such pupils in the school.

Table 3: Organisational Adaptations to Context

Issue	Southside Grange School	Middle Row HS	West-City HSG	The Farcliffe School
Day-to-Day Management of Attendance	Registers checked and followed up by two part- time attendance officers (school funded)	Registers checked and followed up by Home/School Liaison Officer (school funded)	Initially dealt with by tutors and year heads. Then by school-based EWO (half funded by school).	Registers checked by Pastoral Assistants and followed up by Family Liaison Officer (school funded)
Day-to-Day Management of Behaviour	Incidents recorded by staff and passed to head of house and tutor. Senior staff on back-up patrol.	Incidents recorded by staff on green slip and passed to form tutor.	Class teacher expected to deal with incidents. Senior staff on call if necessary. If repeated, referral system through senior staff	Key Stage Assistants patrol school . Refer to head of year if necessary.
In-School Provision for the Most Disruptive Pupils	Classroom known as ‘the Base’. Mornings only. 1 member of staff. Pupils attend for some or all lessons and attempt to keep up with curriculum, prior to reintegration when ready.	Learning Support Centre, 2 staff (learning mentors). Pupils from all years spend two weeks full time before reintegration and follow-up mentoring. Focus on helping with learning problems.	Learning Support Centre, 2 staff. Used for 1:1 programmes on return from exclusion and for proactive group work. Pupils not in centre full time.	Learning Zone for KS3. 1 Teacher and 1 LSA. KS3 pupils, full time. Pupils spend one term. Focus on behaviour, plus basic skills. KS4 group on modified timetables.
Number of pupils accessing this provision	15 (tutor group) of which 12 attend Base	5 (one from each year)	N/A.	10 in KS3, 10 in KS4

Table 3 briefly summarises these various additional mechanisms for securing a learning environment. In one sense they are unremarkable. In a school in a more advantaged area, one might perhaps expect a different range of additional activities, such as extension activities for pupils with above average attainment. In other words, some contextualization of schooling, over and above the core product, is perhaps to be expected. The critical difference here was that, in the case of attendance and behaviour initiatives, the organizational adaptations had

to take place in order to enable basic curriculum delivery to go on. Whereas in schools where attendance and behaviour could be taken for granted, contextualized adaptations might be seen as being additional, in these cases they were not added extras; they were essential in order to enable the schools to offer the standard education that would be expected in any school in the country.

A further point is also worth mentioning: the striking variation in approaches between schools that were apparently dealing with similar problems. A good example is the differences between learning support units. At Middle Row HS, for example, pupils attended the centre for two weeks only, with a focus on learning rather than behaviour, and with core subjects taught by senior mainstream staff. At The Farcliffe School, they attended for a term, focusing on behavioural issues and group work, as well as basic skills. At Southside Grange, most pupils attended for certain lessons only, while also attending those mainstream lessons in which they could cope. While in the learning support unit, they attempted to keep up with their curriculum subjects, bringing work from those lessons. West-City HSG had no system of withdrawal for particular groups of pupils. Its learning support unit provided support for individuals returning for exclusion or offered proactive group work.

Pupil groupings were another example, with a striking contrast between the systems adopted at Southside Grange School and The Farcliffe School, both schools that operated in white working class areas and had a recent history of low attainment. Southside Grange had a banding and setting system for all teaching, except for Key Stage 4 subjects with small numbers of pupils. Higher sets were taught in larger groups, typically about 27 to 30 pupils, and lower sets in smaller groups which could be small as 10 pupils. According to the head teacher, who described mixed ability teaching as ‘anathema’, this allowed able pupils to learn at their own rate, but also enabled teachers to develop specialisms in teaching pupils of lower ability. Teachers had their own classrooms, so that they could customise these according to the groups they most commonly taught. The Farcliffe School had a very different approach. A banding system was abolished by the new head teacher, principally to counter problems of low self-esteem among pupils in the lower band. Within the context of the selective system and the school’s poor performance and reputation, mixed ability teaching was seen as an important way to give all pupils the message that they were equally valued. Most classes were fairly small, about 20 pupils, while under the previous system, top sets had been larger and bottom sets smaller. Ostensibly, therefore, both schools had introduced systems that they believed would bring maximum benefit to pupils of lower ability, given their contexts, yet their strategies were polar opposites.

A similar contrast existed in their responses to the social needs of pupils through the involvement, or otherwise, of external agencies. While both head teachers agreed that social problems should not be allowed to interfere with pupils' learning, and that the objective was to provide a kind of haven from the outside world, their implementation of this strategy was very different. The head teacher at Southside Grange School argued that the school should concentrate on its educational role, and not become involved in trying to resolve other problems associated with poverty. He promoted compensatory measures that were clearly within the school's remit, such as making sure pupils could have hot meals, investing in pastoral care and trying to broaden educational experiences by organising holidays and educational visits. However, a deliberate decision had been made not to have external agencies on the school site, in order to focus organisational resources on the core area of work, education, and on the core performance indicator, attainment. Involvement in social issues was seen as detracting from the school's ability to fulfil its unique role. By contrast, the head teacher at The Farcliffe School argued that although efforts to engage other agencies in tackling social problems might take some energy away from core educational tasks, this was a worthwhile trade-off, because the gain in pupils' ability to learn would offset the loss of learning time and energy devoted to it.

'This isn't a school; it's a family, a social services department, and the rest. If we're going to improve on education, these other things have got to be dealt with.' (Head teacher, The Farcliffe School)

This school had held a multi-agency conference and was systematically attempting to involve other agencies. A social worker visited the school for half a day each fortnight, offering a drop-in for pupils at lunchtime and a 'by appointment' service in the afternoon, open to parents by self referral or at the suggestion of the school. There was a counsellor in school four days a week. The police also started a monthly drop-in at the school, but at the time of the fieldwork it was temporarily discontinued due to staff illness. A local voluntary organisation worked once a week in lesson time with a small number of vulnerable students who were known to be neglected at home, teaching them practical skills like sewing, cooking and ironing. It was also hoped that a site-based school nurse could be provided, running a drop-in health service. Again, apparently similar contexts had resulted in very different responses.

Context and Quality: Do Poor Areas Mean Bad Schools?

This, then, was what was happening in the schools, but how was it related to quality, as defined by OFSTED measures? This section approaches this question from three angles: first by looking at teachers interpretations of the quality implications of unintended contextual impacts; second by looking at the statistical relationships between area deprivation and school quality revealed by the quantitative element of the study; and third by considering the contribution of management responses to ensuring quality.

Quality and unintended process impacts

Much of this paper has focused on the ways in which school environment and practices are shaped by context, describing more pressurised environments, additional and different responsibilities for teachers, and adapted pedagogic responses. Whether these issues had any impact on quality was explored directly in the interviews with head teachers and teaching staff, who were also asked to comment on the eleven aspects of effective schooling identified by Sammons et al. (1995) and Sammons (1999) (summarized in Figure 2), giving their opinions on whether all of these aspects could be achieved in a disadvantaged setting and whether any were more or less easy to do well than in schools in more advantaged settings.

Figure 2: Eleven Aspects of Effective Schools

- ◆ professional leadership
- ◆ a shared vision and goals
- ◆ a learning environment
- ◆ concentration on teaching and learning
- ◆ purposeful teaching
- ◆ high expectations
- ◆ positive reinforcement
- ◆ monitoring progress
- ◆ pupil rights and responsibilities
- ◆ home/school partnership
- ◆ a learning organization

Source: Sammons et al (1995) and Sammons (1999)

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly given the very difficult school environments observed by staff and the prevailing notion that teachers are prone to use context as an excuse for their own poor performance, the unanimous view among these staff was that all of these aspects *could* be achieved in schools in disadvantaged

areas. In fact, some were observed to occur more naturally and easily in such schools than in schools in more advantaged settings. In particular, many staff volunteered that developing a shared vision among the staff and giving positive reinforcement to pupils were probably easier to do in the most disadvantaged areas.

On the other hand, some aspects of good schooling were perceived to be negatively impacted by the environment. Most commonly, teachers mentioned the difficulty of maintaining high expectations when these were frequently disappointed, and the difficulty of consistently maintaining a good environment for learning and a high quality of teaching. Even teachers who were regarded by management as very good teachers noted that there were lessons where their own standards were not met. These comments illustrate the most commonly expressed sentiments of the staff who were interviewed:

‘I don’t consider myself a poor teacher but the first term I taught here, God, it was awful. I must have taught half a dozen lessons that I was pleased with, certainly no more. It was awful. Forced into a conflict situation where you have to either prevail or be trodden underfoot, and I hate that. It’s not easy to give a good lesson here, however good the teacher is.’ (Class Teacher 4, The Farcliffe School)

‘High expectations can be more difficult. You can get worn down. You can find yourself thinking ‘ they’re never going to learn, what’s the point’’. (Class Teacher 3, Middle Row HS)

‘High quality teaching and learning is possible but it’s harder. It’s harder because your teachers cannot focus purely on high quality teaching and learning because they’re focusing so much on other things. ... The number of times that you’re trying to deal with a [emotionally disturbed child] in the class, and you’re trying to keep that kid on board and you’re trying to avoid a major confrontation, you’re trying to avoid problems for other ones. It makes it harder.’ (Head teacher, Southside Grange School)

‘Doable but harder’ was thus the teachers’ view of whether quality schooling could be delivered. With exceptional and consistent effort, quality could be achieved, but it did not come easily, and was particularly difficult in schools in unfavourable market situations with poor reputations where it was difficult to recruit experienced staff and where staff worked in an atmosphere of public

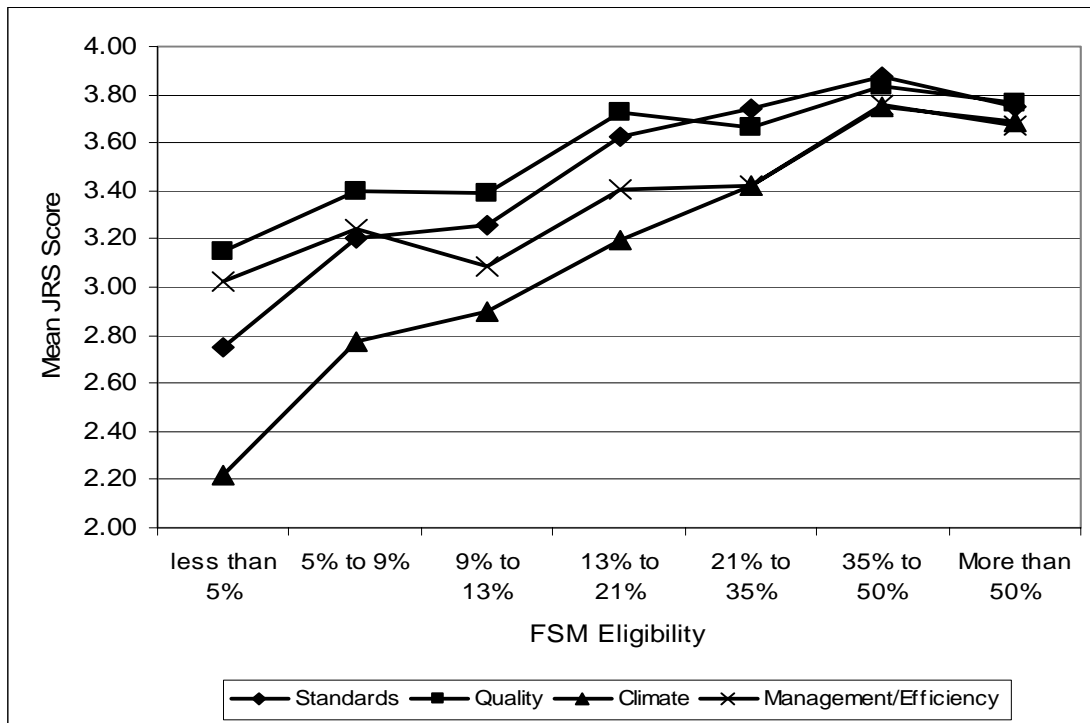
scrutiny and criticism. This point was well illustrated by discussions around the issue of balancing classroom control with high quality teaching. While all the staff agreed that this was challenging, it was something that was spoken about much more by less experienced teachers than newer ones, and mentioned more frequently at Southside Grange and The Farcliffe School (the lower attaining schools) than at Middle Row HS and West-City HSG (the higher attaining schools), which enjoyed better reputations and were therefore more likely to attract more experienced or able teachers, and more able to develop an environment of critical self-review.

The discussions with staff also revealed the importance of different kinds of deprived area context. Some aspects of quality could be more difficult to achieve in some deprived areas than in others. In particular, because it was disruption and conflict that made concentrating on teaching and learning difficult, fewer quality problems relating to the learning environment were reported in the inner city, mixed ethnic, schools than in the white working class schools. This is, of course, a somewhat over-simplified presentation, because it is also important to note the more favourable institutional and market contexts of the inner city schools. Area context was not the only factor driving quality, but it was a factor, interacting with market and institutional contexts and with the agency of individual managers and staff.

Relationships between quality and area disadvantage

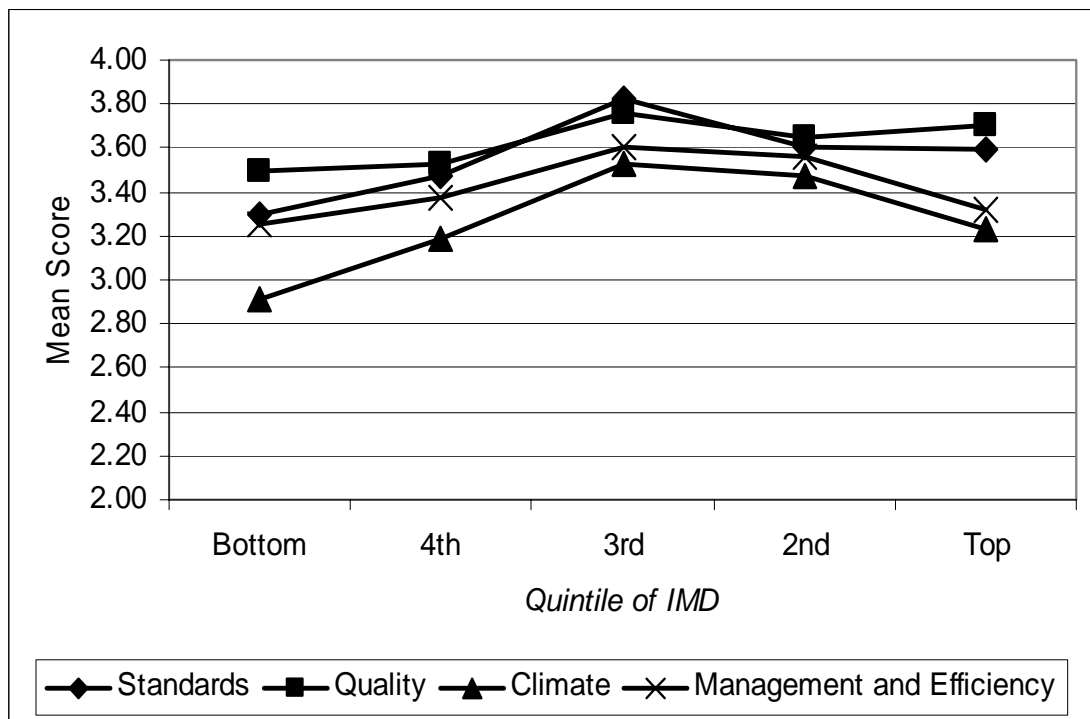
The importance of context for quality was also highlighted by the quantitative analysis of OFSTED JRS scores carried out for this study. This confirmed OFSTED's own published findings (see Figure 1) that higher levels of deprivation are associated with lower levels of quality. Worse JRS scores were in general related to higher deprivation levels as measured by FSM and the IMD score of the ward in which the school was located). The relationship was less strong for area deprivation than for FSM, reflecting the fact that the two are not exactly matched. Interestingly, scores improved slightly in the most deprived schools, with more than 50% eligible for FSM or in the top quintile of the IMD (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3: Relationship between JRS Scores and FSM



Source: OFSTED JRS data. Note higher JRS scores denote worse performance.

Figure 4: Relationship between JRS Scores and IMD



Source: OFSTED JRS data. Note higher JRS scores denote worse performance.

Climate was the aspect of quality upon which there was most variation according to deprivation (Table 4)⁷ and it is significant to note that the principal sub-category of ‘climate’ which was much worse in deprived areas than others was attendance, with the other measures of pupil performance or characteristics (such as attitudes and behaviour) following the overall pattern of being slightly worse in the moderately deprived areas, and those which are direct measures of what schools do (such as provision for pupil welfare) actually being slightly better in the most deprived areas than in the least deprived (Figures 5 and 6). These are interesting observations that would be usefully tested on a larger sample. They suggest that in some respects, what schools actually do is better in poor areas than others, even though measures of outcome such as the extent to which pupils attend can be worse, a distinction that is perhaps insufficiently drawn out when schools are publicly criticized for their poor quality.

Table 4: Correlations Between Deprivation and School Quality Measures

	Standards	Quality of Education	Climate	Management and Efficiency
FSM Eligibility	.357**	.262**	.503**	.226**
IMD Score	.182**	.124*	.229**	.116*

** significant at the 0.01 level. * significant at the 0.05 level

Source: OFSTED JRS data.

⁷ OFSTED’s own analysis indicates that it is standards that vary most with FSM. The difference between the findings of the two probably arises because of the weighting given to attainment in OFSTED’s analysis, whereas no weighting was applied in my analysis, or may arise because of the wider sample used in OFSTED’s analysis.

Figure 5: Area Deprivation and Aspects of School Climate (1)

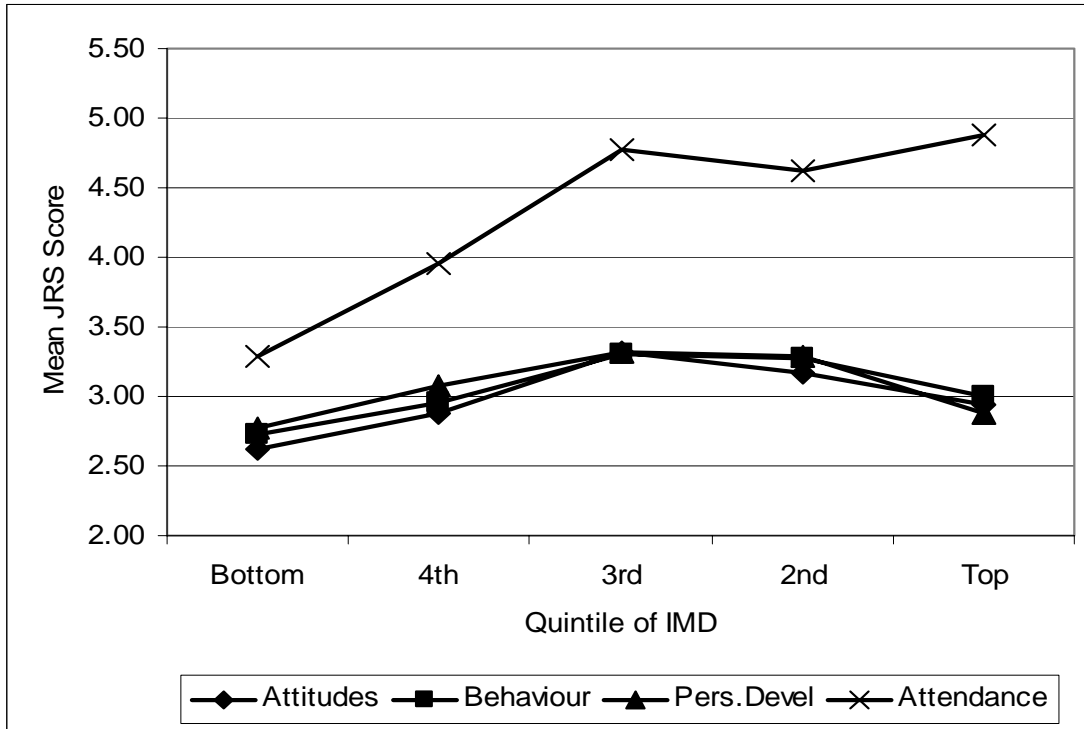
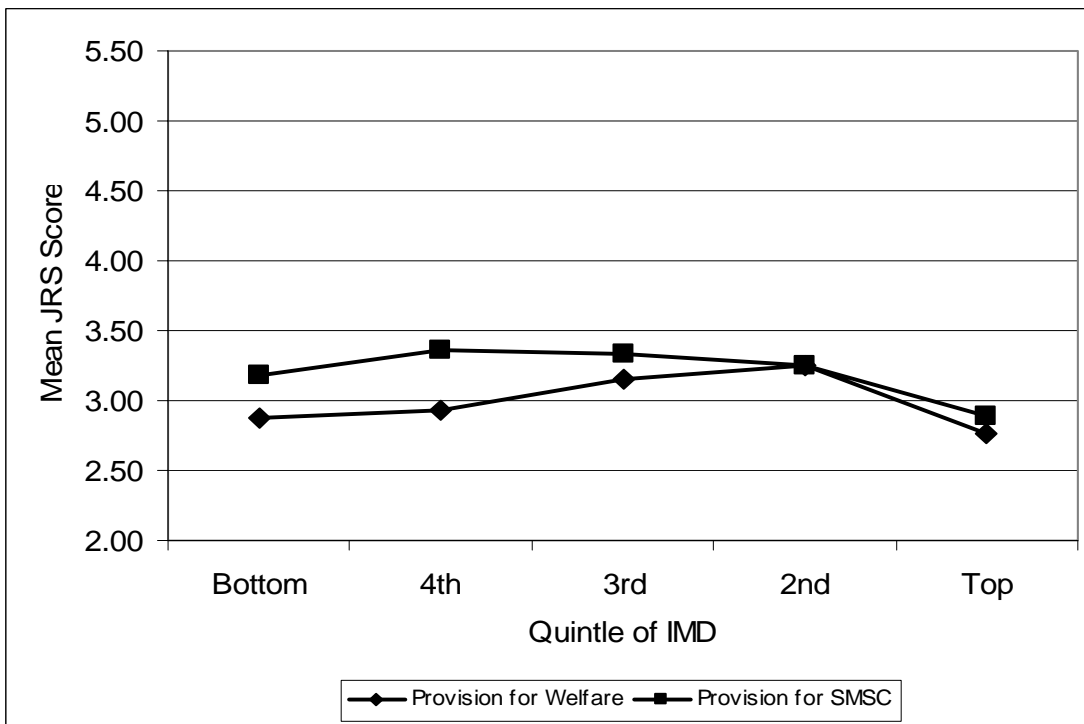


Figure 6: Area Deprivation and Aspects of School Climate (2)



Source: OFSTED JRS data

The quantitative analysis also suggested that the relationship between quality and deprivation is stronger in certain types of areas than others, with ethnic mix appearing to be an important factor. The JRS analysis showed that the proportion of ethnic minority residents in an area was significantly, although not strongly, associated with *better* quality in deprived areas. JRS scores were slightly but not significantly better in ethnic minority areas regardless of deprivation. They were significantly better in the case of climate and standards once the effect of deprivation was controlled for (Table 5).

Table 5: School Quality Measures and Area Characteristics

(each column shows original correlation then result after controlling for IMD score)

Area Characteristic	Standards	Quality of Education	Climate	Management and Efficiency
% Asian residents	-.142* -.282**	-.024 -.115	-.049 -.195**	-.088 -.182*
% Black residents	-.003 -.144	.054 -.024	.080 -.078	.042 -.031
% Black and Asian	-.107 -.271**	-.002 -.095	-.007 -.185**	-.051 -.150

** significant at the 0.01 level. * significant at the 0.05 level

Source: OFSTED JRS data,

As the table shows, this effect was associated with a high percentage of Asian rather than black residents.⁸ Thus schools in deprived areas with high proportions of Asian residents had more favourable climates and better pupil progress than schools in similarly deprived areas with low Asian populations. Closer analysis showed that proportion of Asian residents was significantly correlated with attendance (.327), attitudes (.249) and provision made for spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development (.248), but not with other aspects of school climate. It was also correlated with management and efficiency and educational quality but not significantly.

⁸ It is important to note that the qualitative study on which much of this paper is based did not include a school with a majority black population, nor high proportions of Indian pupils. The apparently beneficial process effects that are reported cannot be assumed to be replicated in 'ethnic minority areas' more generally. The suggestion is that different ethnic compositions will have different implications.

The correlation co-efficients are not large and it is difficult to go further than to suggest that there may be a small beneficial effect of a high Asian population. This would need to be tested with a larger sample and a more complex analysis. Such a finding would be consistent with the notion of more favourable contexts for schooling that emerged from the qualitative data, and might in part explain the earlier finding (Figure 4) that quality appears to be better in schools in the *most* deprived areas on the IMD than in slightly less deprived areas, because high ethnic minority populations and particularly high Asian populations are much more commonly found in the wards at the top end of the IMD. In this sample, wards for schools in the bottom three quintiles of the IMD (i.e. the less deprived areas) had ethnic minority populations close to the national average (about 5%), whereas in the top two quintiles, the non-white population was 29% and 33% respectively, with the Asian population being particularly high in the top quintile. While this does not imply that deprived areas with high Asian populations do not throw up their own challenges, it does seem to support the qualitative findings that it may be misleading to make quality comparisons between schools in deprived areas purely on the basis of FSM. Because a school in one kind of deprived area can achieve exemplary practice does not mean that the same will be possible for a school in another kind of area where the context may be organisationally less favourable.

The contribution of management responses

Quality, therefore, looks more difficult to achieve in disadvantaged areas than in others, and more difficult in some disadvantaged areas than in others. But it may still be argued that good management and professional practice can overcome these difficulties, since some schools do offer a good quality education and since staff themselves insist that quality is doable. While this is clearly true to a certain extent, three caveats need to be offered on the basis of evidence from this study.

First, it is not always apparent what constitutes good practice in these unusual and challenging circumstances, as the wide variation between the schools indicated. Differences in context may give rise to the need for differentiated strategies. For example, it may be argued that, since research shows that mixed ability groups tend to benefit lower attaining pupils both socially and educationally (Hallam 2002), mixed ability teaching is the right grouping strategy for a school with a large number of low ability pupils (such as The Farcliffe). On the other hand, since pupils themselves report that the benefit of setting is that the most disruptive pupils are all removed into bottom sets, leaving others to learn (Ireson and Hallam, 2001), one could argue that setting is the right strategy for a school like Southside Grange which attracts some aspiring pupils with above average prior attainment, but also serves some of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the country and has a minority of pupils

with extremely disturbed behaviour. A quality education may conceivably be achieved in different ways in different settings. In other respects, it may be argued that we do not yet know what are the optimum strategies to follow, for example in the design and use of learning support units or the deployment of external agencies. Where educational research has provided insufficiently differentiated information about good practice in different contexts, it may be difficult for school managers to make the right decisions that would enhance quality in specific areas of school practice.

Second, it is not clear that school managers are always in a position to implement quality-enhancing strategies. Despite the more generous funding of schools in disadvantaged areas, resources in the case study schools were clearly insufficient to meet some of the additional needs that they faced. Two specific issues were raised. The first was the need for smaller teaching groups or greater LSA support, because of the large numbers of pupils with educational or emotional needs. The second was the need for greater numbers of language support staff in the inner city schools. Most of the support went to pupils at the very early stages of English, in the form of direct tuition, but there were also large numbers of pupils whose only use of English was at school, and whose lack of fluency inhibited their access to the curriculum. At Middle Row HS, a senior teacher involved in language support estimated that about two-thirds of the pupils would benefit from some support with English. At both of the inner-city schools, mainstream teaching staff felt that language support within departments, helping with the development of teaching and learning resources, would be a valuable addition. It is likely that further resource issues would be raised in a study focusing particularly on budgeting and financial issues.

There were, however, also other constraints preventing the schools from implementing what they might have considered to be optimum strategies. One was lack of flexibility in provision for the minority of pupils who found it difficult to cope with school and had extreme behavioural problems and/or non-attendance. Because of their legal obligations, the schools' efforts were directed into getting these pupils to come to school, attend lessons and learn the national curriculum. However, many teachers felt that school, the nature of the curriculum, and the environment of academic pressure was part of the problem for certain pupils at certain stages of their learning careers, and that alternatives might work better: smaller groups or individual tuition in less formal settings, and less academic curricula that valued other skills and qualities, for example. Although the schools could exercise a certain amount of curriculum flexibility, they did not have the flexibility to offer a substantially different educational experience for pupils who were likely to fail in the current system because of social and psychological problems. As a result, a disproportionate amount of each school's time went on managing the needs of these pupils and minimizing

the disruption to others. Another issue was that strategies that would enhance educational quality were subject to the constraints of market and institutional pressures. For example, at The Farcliffe School, half the staff were unqualified teachers and the unpopularity of the school was such that staff turnover was extremely high. There were insufficient staff to fill Head of Year positions. At Southside Grange, the pressure of falling rolls and an unbalanced intake had led the head teacher and governors to pursue an aggressive marketing strategy to attract more middle class parents, an imperative that undoubtedly influenced educational decisions such as the move towards banding and setting. In other words, there were systemic constraints on the ability of head teachers to adapt to their particular contexts, a finding that suggests that relying on the agency of head teachers to improve quality, in the absence of systemic changes, is unlikely to be wholly successful.

Third, good practice in one respect may have detrimental organisational impacts in another. For example, dealing with welfare issues or behaviour may detract from preparing lessons or planning new initiatives. This is a difficult point to substantiate in the absence of a comparison with schools in less pressurised circumstances, and certainly respondents in this study were at pains to emphasise that their efforts in areas of behaviour, attendance, and additional learning needs did not prevent them from carrying out other duties such as preparation, marking or planning, rather that these activities were pushed into evenings and weekends. However, it is clear that disadvantaged contexts generate additional time implications, both for mainstream teaching staff and in particular for senior staff. In the case study schools, heads of year, deputy heads and head teachers took responsibility for serious incidents and for liaison with parents and other agencies, and were also responsible for the management of additional non-teaching staff such as LSAs and attendance workers and for bidding for and monitoring projects funded from specific funding streams. This was a significant time commitment. At Middle Row HS, for example, one deputy head estimated that she spent between half a day and one day per week on attendance issues, including managing the home/school liaison worker, administering the rewards system, and liaising with the LEA's education welfare officer over extreme cases. Logic would suggest that at the very least, this level of senior management commitment must mean that other tasks have to be carried out after school hours, creating additional pressure on staff.

Thus while it seems clear that, even in the most difficult circumstances, good managers can deliver quality schooling, they have to do so despite a range of constraints: lack of contextualised good practice knowledge; insufficient resources in some areas; lack of flexibility; market pressures; inability to attract and retain staff; and the knock-on effects of additional efforts in one area upon practice in another.

What Can Be Done?

In summary, the research reported in this paper does three things:

- (a) Supports earlier research findings that disadvantaged contexts have process implications for schools, and provoke management responses in the form of additional systems for managing behaviour and attendance, additional provision for pupils with particular needs, and additional welfare roles. These are all seen as necessary responses in order to facilitate essential teaching and learning, not as ‘icing on the cake’ provision.
- (b) Suggests that these process implications are likely to make it more difficult for schools in disadvantaged areas to achieve a high quality of education than schools in other areas, particularly in relation to school climate, and in the provision of an environment conducive to teaching and learning. Low quality is not an inevitable consequence of high levels of disadvantage, but is more likely, even where good management is in place.
- (c) Suggests that different kinds of deprived area have different implications for schools, with some high FSM schools enjoying an environment more conducive to delivering a high quality education than others.

There are a number of implications for policy. One is that differences between schools in different kinds of disadvantaged areas need to be reflected in funding mechanisms. Current mechanisms are too crude, with the proportion of extra funding allocated to schools in poor areas determined by the proportion of families on means-tested benefits and the proportion from ethnic minorities. Yet this study suggests that some high FSM, high ethnic minority areas may actually offer more favourable environments for schooling than white, lower FSM areas, with implications for organizational resource needs, although they may of course also face extreme pressures in terms of the language and welfare needs of their pupils. Either better measures of context are needed, or funding mechanisms based on an assessment of the roles and activities needed, rather than on crude measures of intake. Simple poverty and ethnicity measures are not sufficient, and may even be misleading.

A second implication is that policies to improve schools need to be contextualized to take account of the different circumstances in which they are operating. Transparently, trying to encourage heads and teachers to work towards generic ‘good practice’ is not ensuring that the quality of schooling is consistently as good in disadvantaged areas as in others. But what would a contextualized school improvement policy look like?

First of all, it would need to recognize that some of the practices in schools in disadvantaged areas are necessarily different from those in other areas and that differentiated provision is needed, adapted to the specific needs in each school. This would mean adjusted curriculum, learning resources and pedagogic approaches, to enable effective teaching and learning to take place. At the level of the classroom, teachers need to be equipped with suitable resources for working with low ability pupils, and mechanisms need to be developed to transfer expertise from special needs to mainstream education, in recognition of the fact that some lower sets are effectively special needs groups, requiring teaching techniques with which mainstream teachers are not necessarily equipped. At the level of the school, we need a better understanding of effective practice in particular circumstances, in addition to the generic practice lessons that are already available. For example, what is the optimum size of groups for pupils with emotional and behavioural needs? What are the benefits to different groups of pupils (for example those with high ability but behavioural problems or those with low attainment and self-esteem) from mixed ability or streamed groups? What is the most effective way to run learning support centres for different groups of pupils? How are parents most effectively engaged in different circumstances? Where this knowledge is available, we need to make sure that it is known and implemented, regardless of market pressures. At a wider level still, we may need to consider more radical models of schooling for some disadvantaged pupils who find it difficult to learn within the standard organisational framework of a school, who struggle with the pace of curriculum or the form of assessment, or who are unmotivated by a curriculum that seems to bear little relationship to their life experiences and opportunities.

It could certainly be argued that on this front, government policy is moving in the right direction, with policies like Education Action Zones and Excellence in Cities enabling additional provision in low-income areas and the recent 14-19 Green Paper (DfES 2002b) and subsequent policy document 14-19: Opportunity and Excellence (DfES 2003b) recognising the need for the development of a wider range of curricular options, and for the need for local variation relevant to local labour markets and training opportunities. However, on the other hand, certain initiatives, such as the literacy strategy, are explicitly decontextualised, requiring teachers to adopt standard practices regardless of circumstance.

Second, a contextualised school improvement policy would need to recognise, systematically, that differences in practice have implications for organisational design. For example, smaller teaching groups may be needed (and therefore more teachers), or more learning support staff or units. Additional staff may be needed in pupil welfare or parental liaison roles. Here again, progress is beginning to be made through Excellence in Cities and other government initiatives. But more needs to be done. Funding for these initiatives needs to be

secure, not provided through short term competitive funding streams. The sums needed are far in excess of what is currently provided. For example, if it is the case that at schools like Middle Row HS two-thirds of pupils would benefit from additional help with English in the classroom, levels of language support staffing would need to be about ten times their current level. Critically, additional management time needs to be provided, so that the burden of running new projects and managing new staff does not overload already overloaded heads and deputies.

Third, contextualized school improvement would also need to recognize that there are organizational design implications in relation to the delivery of core teaching and learning activities, not just in relation to additional provisions. Regardless of the additional welfare roles that are needed, the basic work of teachers in schools in poor areas is different from those in other, more advantaged schools. The constant mixing of pastoral and educational roles as emotional needs are met within and outside the classroom are energy-sapping, and time that could be used for preparation and marking is used for following up incidents, completing paperwork, counselling pupils, contacting parents and other agencies, and consulting with colleagues. We need more systematic efforts to redesign teachers' jobs accordingly, for example by altering the balance between contact and non-contact time for mainstream teachers (and by implication altering staffing ratios), and offering sabbaticals or secondment opportunities. This is a key issue which is as yet unaddressed in government policy.

Fourth, beyond the level of the individual school, a contextualized school improvement policy would recognize that quality can only be ensured if there are sufficient good teachers attracted to and retained in schools in poor areas. Financial incentives and job and career re-design may need to be considered. Moreover, since many staff in this study reported that the classroom management challenges posed in these schools were beyond what they were prepared for, whether moving from initial teacher training or from other more advantaged schools, there may also be a need for more specific training and support to prepare teachers for the particular challenges of disadvantaged schools.

Recent policy developments suggest that the current government is not entirely oblivious to the need to develop different models of schooling for poor areas nor of the need for extra funding. It is inching towards a contextualized school improvement policy through increasingly valuable small-scale initiatives. This research suggests these efforts are not enough and that the government needs to take the plunge and implement more wide-ranging reforms that could really enable schools in poor areas to work as well as schools anywhere else.

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